

Seven rules for getting Brexit-talk right



Despite protestations to the contrary, it's clear that the process of the UK's withdrawal from the EU has not been going to plan. It's time we discussed 'How (not) to talk about Brexit.' **Tim Oliver** (University of Loughborough) suggests seven rules.

Britain's vote to leave the EU has led to a flood of books, articles, blog posts, and more than enough tweets. I know because I've added my own share. It includes my new textbook, *Understanding Brexit: A Concise Introduction*. Concise is 75,000 words, and whether anyone can fully understand Brexit is a moot point. Brexit is the dominant issue in UK politics because so much is at stake. But are we – academics, writers, Leavers, Remainers, journalists, politicians, officials, businesspeople – talking and writing about it in ways that make sense? I'm reminded of how before the EU referendum there was discussion of, to borrow from the report from British Future, '[How \(not\) to talk about Europe](#).' It's time we discussed 'How (not) to talk about Brexit.' As a start, I would like to suggest seven rules.

Rule 1: Be more specific about what it is you're referring to when you say 'Brexit'.

Academics love to define things, except, it seems, when it comes to large all-encompassing terms, which is what 'Brexit' has become. It's increasingly as useless as 'globalisation,' 'neoliberalism,' or 'Europeanisation.' Brexit can be used to summarise a series of political processes unfolding at various levels and timeframes, but we would benefit from examining and naming them more specifically. Failure to do so risks turning 'Brexit' into a shorthand for most of British politics.

Rule 2: Don't let talking about Brexit drown out the rest of British politics.

Given how much it touches on, studying Brexit can be the best way to understand the contemporary UK. To a point, that is. Brexit is not British politics, only a part of it. It has, however, taken up so much of the bandwidth of British politics that one would be forgiven for thinking that it is British politics. That does a disservice to the many challenges and debates facing the UK that are largely independent of Brexit and always have been. Of course, Brexit will have an effect on so much of life in the UK, but the UK already has the powers to change such absurdities as an unelected House of Lords, the UK's stark and growing levels of inequality, poor infrastructure spending, or the need for sustainable military capabilities. Obsessing about Brexit can be a distraction from these and other issues.

Rule 3: You cannot be neutral. Whatever you say will be part of the fight to define the narrative of Brexit.

The fight to define the narrative of Brexit, i.e. what it was the British people meant when 52% of them who voted did so for Leave, has, whether you like it or not, been the central struggle of British politics since the referendum. Onto it have been hooked a whole host of issues ranging from choices about the UK's political economy through to the UK's standing in the world. This fight won't end soon. Not only because withdrawing from the EU is not a short-term process, but because Brexit is about what sort of country the UK wants to be. This doesn't mean everything you say has to be driven by politics. There exists a wealth of data, information and analysis which goes beyond the partisan bickering found in most outlets where the focus can be on the internal bickering of the Conservative and Labour parties. Whether it's the plethora of EU reports on Brexit or UK parliamentary reports (never overlook the evidence sections), a lot of issues have been covered by high quality analysis that can, if we use it, create a better informed and high-quality fight.

Rule 4: Don't assume the British people or elite understand the UK state and politics.

In the early stages of drafting *Understanding Brexit* my publisher warned me not to take for granted a general reader's knowledge of the topic. I sympathised from having taught political science for over a decade. Knowing how few people understand the EU, I included a section on the EU's evolution, institutions and key policies. In doing so I overlooked that a lot of people in Britain, including all the way up to Ministers of the Crown, have rarely thought about or been taught about the UK state, its evolution and how it operates. If Brexit is about what type of country Britain wants to be, then that in part stems from varying levels of knowledge and satisfaction at its current setup. I've often found that explaining Brexit involves helping fellow Britons understand our country.

Rule 5: Recognise that the British (and you) are on a steep learning curve about the UK, the EU, and the wider modern world (especially trade).

It follows from Rule 5 that when talking about Brexit you need to take into account that many in Britain are being presented with a series of questions and debates about the country's identity, society, political economy, trade, security, international position, constitution, legal system, sovereignty, unity, party politics and the attitudes and values that define it. Those debates long predate the vote, but the referendum and result not only brought them together but poured fresh fuel into each. And this is before we turn to the need to learn about such matters as free trade deals, tariffs, non-tariff barriers, regulatory convergence, WTO schedules and so forth. Whether it's the British public, ministers, officials, journalists or experts, we have all been put on a steep learning curve. The process involves lots of uncomfortable questions and silences for everyone including you.

Rule 6: Remember that Brexit can bore people. A lot.

It might have come to dominate British politics, but that does not mean Brexit excites people. Pollsters have long pointed out that the issue of Europe has rarely excited the British people. The topic only excites when it connects to issues that people do care about: immigration, the economy, housing, English identity, Scottish independence, or the NHS. For those 'Brexhausted' there is no sign of a let-up. The outpouring of books, articles, chapters, reports, media articles, TV programmes, conferences, assemblies, workshops, speeches, art work, plays, even poems, looks set to continue. In part this is because so much remains to be explored and discussed, not least some big questions about the UK itself. Hopes the referendum would be cathartic, settle Britain's 'European question', or be a great exercise in democratic debate have been dashed by a debate and result that has instead added to existing divisions, created more questions than answers, and left Britain with a debate that often distracts from the day to day needs of the country.



Protester at an Anti-Brexit rally in Liverpool, September 2018. © Tim Jokl / Flickr

Rule 7: Don't patronise, belittle or ignore the British people.

All sides have been doing this, including Leave. Too often I have heard Remain supporters belittle the British people for the choice made with a slim majority. That result has left some on the Remain side too willing to apologise for Britain and dismiss it as a country doomed to oblivion. It has added to a certain sense of decline and guilt about Britain's past that has long overhung and hamstrung British pro-Europeanism. Commentators elsewhere in the EU have not helped. The UK is not the aberration some elsewhere in the EU want it to be. British Leave voters are not all peculiar, racist hangovers of Britain's imperial past. They can and do, to a certain extent, mirror feelings found across Europe. The vote was a vivid reminder that nation states and nationalism still matter. Leave campaigners and those who have rushed to study Leave have also failed, and sometimes failed miserably to not patronise the British people.

Despite protestations to the contrary, it's clear to all but the most ardent Leave voters that the process of withdrawal has not been going to any Leave plan because, of course, there was no plan. The rush to celebrate, sympathise with, or study the 52% who voted Leave has meant largely ignoring or taking for granted the voice and concerns of the 48% who voted Remain. That explains why Theresa May, Leave campaigners and many analysts blinded by a one-sided focus on Leave voters were shocked when in the 2017 General Election it was the votes of angry Remain voters that played a crucial part in unexpectedly depriving the Conservatives of their parliamentary majority.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics. This article also appeared on the [Clingendael blog](#).

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